



6. CAUTION: STEREOTYPES AHEAD

What to Do

Read the introduction and story below, then write your thoughts on the facing page.

We meet somebody we don't know. We notice their hair, skin color, clothes. Almost instantly we begin forming an opinion about them. That's just part of human nature, to identify and categorize something according to what we know when faced with what we don't know.

But what's the danger of that? For example, someone is short so he or she must not be a good basketball player. Or we automatically think that for someone who is an honors student, everything comes easy. These are examples of *stereotypes*—a characterization of someone based on a generalization, which denies the individual his or her identity.

Here is an excerpt from *They're All Named Wildfire*. The novel tells the story of an African-American girl, Shanterey, who moves into a white community, and Jenny, a white neighbor. At first Jenny thinks of Shanterey as a new friend, but when Jenny's other friends call Shanterey racist names, Jenny decides to side against Shanterey. In this passage, a rainy day has forced the fifth-graders to stay inside for recess on the first day of school.

Excerpt from *They're All Named Wildfire*

By Nancy Springer

Some of the kids went to the gym after lunch. But Heather and Becky and a lot of us girls went back to the room. Becky put a record on the record player, and some of us started to dance. After a while Shanterey came in.

I was dancing, and dancing made me feel good. I felt ready to be her friend again. "Hey, Shanterey!" I yelled. "Come on and dance!"

"Yeah, Shanterey!" yelled Heather. "Dance!" But she didn't say it the same way I had. Shanterey's face didn't change, but her voice came out hard and flat, and she said, "Black people got rhythm, right? Well, not this one. You dance." And she sat down at her desk.

"Aw, c'mon!" said Heather, nasty-nice. "Do the moonwalk for us, like Michael Jackson!"

Shanterey sat scrunched-down in her seat, and I felt like I wanted to go somewhere else. So I went to the girls' room, by myself, and I don't know what they said to her after that.

Excerpt from *They're All Named Wildfire*, by Nancy Springer.

EXPLORE YOUR IDEAS

1. How was Heather's invitation to Shanterey different from Jenny's (the narrator)?
2. How does Shanterey feel about the invitation?
3. What stereotype does Heather apply to Shanterey?
4. What do you think Jenny could have done to support her friend?
5. How do you think Jenny feels about the way that Heather treats Shanterey?

YOUR VIEW

Can you think of a time when you saw someone else being judged unfairly because of a stereotype?

What was the situation, and what was the stereotype?

How did you and others involved respond?

